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ABSTRACT

This study investigated predictors of foreign language anxiety in 210 university students enrolled in French, Spanish, German, and Japanese language courses. Several instruments were used to gather information on student characteristics, study behaviors, attitudes, and language anxiety experience during the fourth week of the semester. Results revealed that 14 variables (gender, age, academic achievement, semester course load, prior history of visiting foreign countries, high school experience with foreign languages, expected grade for current language course, perceived intellectual ability, perceived scholastic competence, perceived appearance, perceived self-worth, cooperativeness, value placed on competitive learning, academic locus of control) contributed significantly to prediction of foreign language anxiety. Freshmen and sophomores reported the lowest levels of anxiety, and levels increased linearly as a function of year of study. Implications of the findings for understanding language anxiety and for classroom teaching and learning are discussed. Contains 13 references. (MSE)

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Foreign Language Anxiety Among College Students

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Abstract

Foreign language anxiety is a complex phenomenon which has been found to be one of the best predictors of foreign language achievement. This study of 210 university students examined factors which predict foreign language anxiety. A setwise multiple regression analysis revealed that 14 variables (i.e., gender, age, academic achievement, semester course load, prior history of visiting foreign countries, prior high school experience with foreign languages, expected overall average for current language course, perceived intellectual ability, perceived scholastic competence, perceived appearance, perceived self-worth, cooperativeness, value placed on competitive learning, and academic locus of control) contributed significantly to the prediction of foreign language anxiety. Analysis of variance, which included trend analysis, revealed that freshmen and sophomores reported the lowest levels of foreign language anxiety, and that anxiety levels increased linearly as a function of year of study. The educational implications of these findings for understanding foreign language anxiety and for increasing foreign language learning are discussed, as are suggestions for future research.

Foreign Language Anxiety Among College Students

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of college students required to enroll in language courses as part of their degree program. Unfortunately, many students have negative experiences while learning a foreign language. Indeed, these students often delay enrollment into a language class for as long as possible (Young, 1991), and may even change their degree program in order to avoid learning a foreign language (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). In fact, foreign language has been found to be more anxiety-inducing than any other course in a student's program of study (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989).

Furthermore, foreign language anxiety, as it is commonly termed, has been found to be associated negatively with language performance (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991c; Phillips, 1992) and teachers' ratings of achievement (Trylong, 1987). Specifically, a recent body of literature suggests that high levels of foreign language anxiety interfere with foreign language learning (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c).

Since anxiety can have a debilitating effect on the acquisition of a foreign language, it is important to be able to identify students with high levels of foreign language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986), so that activities can be tailored to the affective needs of the learner (Young, 1991). According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1991b), almost all studies of language anxiety have examined it as "a stable personality trait, among experienced language learners" (p. 297). Aida (1994) concludes that the research on foreign language anxiety still is underdeveloped and that "studies examining the relationship between anxiety and learner characteristics will help us increase our understanding of language learning from the learner's perspective and provide a wider range of insights" (p. 165).

Although many studies have found a negative relationship between foreign language anxiety and achievement, other questions related to language anxiety remain to be examined (Phillips, 1992). Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate correlates of foreign language anxiety, including student

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characteristics, which, to date, have not received attention, as well as those which have been identified as being predictors of foreign language anxiety. Yet to be considered also is whether findings pertaining to foreign language anxiety are consistent across different languages. Thus, the anxiety levels of students of French, Spanish, German, and Japanese also were examined.

This study should be of considerable interest to language educators and students because of the negative impact of foreign language anxiety, not only on the various domains of language performance, but also on students' attitudes and perceptions of language learning in general (Phillips, 1992).

Method

Subjects

The sample comprised 210 students from various disciplines enrolled in French (n = 61), Spanish (n = 125), German (n = 19), and Japanese (n = 5) introductory, intermediate, and advanced courses at a mid-southern university. Participants received extra course credit. A Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance revealed no difference in foreign language anxiety ($\chi^2 = 3.06$; df = 3; $p > 0.05$) between students enrolled in Spanish courses, French courses, German courses, and Japanese courses. Therefore, the responses of all participants were combined.

The ages of the respondents ranged from 18 to 71 ($M = 22.7$, $SD = 6.5$). Of the 210 participants, 140 (66.7%) were female, and 95.7% spoke English as their native language. With respect to year of study, the participants consisted of freshmen (15.3%), sophomores (20.1%), juniors (30.1%), seniors (31.6%), and graduates (1.9%). Of students enrolled in introductory classes, 21.5% were freshmen, 23.9% were sophomores, 31.5% were juniors, and 23.1% were seniors. With respect to the intermediate classes, 5.8% were freshmen, 13.5% were sophomores, 30.8% were juniors, and 50.0% were seniors. Students enrolled in advanced courses comprised 4.8% freshmen, 19.1% sophomores, 28.6% juniors, and 47.6% seniors. These students represented 43 different degree programs from the colleges of Business Administration, Education, Fine Arts and Communication, Health and Applied Sciences, Liberal Arts, and Natural Sciences

and Mathematics, with a mean GPA of 2.97 (*SD* = 0.70). The majority of students (59.8%) were required to take the language course as part of their degree program. The number of courses taken by the participants ranged from 1 to 9 (*M* = 5.1, *SD* = 1.2). In addition, 82.9% of the participants had studied a foreign language formally in high school, while 34.3% had done so in college. The majority of students (55.7%) had never left the United States. Of those who had, the number of countries visited ranged from 1 to 9. Approximately one-fourth (25.4%) of the students had immediate family members whose native language was not English. Finally, the grades expected by the participants for their foreign language course ranged from 68 to 100 (*M* = 87.1, *SD* = 9.3).

Instruments

A battery of instruments was used in the study, namely: the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), the Self-Perception Profile for College Students (SPPCS), the Social Interdependence Scale (SIS), the Academic Locus of Control Scale (ALC), the Study Habits Inventory (SHI), and the Background Demographic Form (BDF). Participants were given the questionnaire packet containing the six instruments during the fourth week of the semester. They were instructed to complete the battery of instruments at home and to return it within two weeks.

The FLCAS, developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), is a 33-item Likert-type instrument, which assesses the degree to which students feel anxious during language class. *The SPPCS* is a 54-item scale, comprising 12 subscales (Neeman & Harter, 1986), which indicates students' level of academic self-concept. *The SIS,* developed by Johnson and Norem-Hebeisen (1979) is a 22-item, 5-point Likert-type format instrument measuring individuals' cooperative, competitive, and individualistic perceptions. *The ALC,* developed by Trice (1985), has 28 true-false items related to personal control over academic outcomes. *The SHI,* developed by Jones and Slate (1992), consists of 63 true-false items designed to assess the typical study behaviors of college students. All instruments were selected because they have been found to have high reliability and

validity. Finally, *The BDF*, developed specifically for this study, extracted relevant demographic information such as age, sex, ethnicity, degree program, year of study, native language, and countries visited.

Results

A setwise multiple regression analysis revealed the following variables which contributed significantly ($F[14, 195] = 10.70$, $p < .0001$) to the prediction of foreign language anxiety: gender, age, academic achievement, semester course load, prior history of visiting foreign countries, prior high school experience with foreign languages, expected overall average for current language course, perceived intellectual ability, perceived scholastic competence, perceived appearance, perceived self-worth, cooperativeness, value placed on competitive learning, and academic locus of control. These 14 variables combined to explain 43.5% of the variation in foreign language anxiety. The regression model suggests that students with the highest levels of foreign language anxiety tended to have at least one of these characteristics: female, older, high academic achievers, taking a heavy semester course load, had never visited a foreign country, had not taken any high school foreign language courses, had low expectations of their overall average for their current language course, had a negative perception of their intellectual ability, had a negative perception of their scholastic competence, had a negative perception of their appearance, had a negative perception of their self-worth, did not like cooperative learning, did not value competitive learning, and had an internal academic locus of control.

A univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA), using year of study as the independent variable, revealed a significant linear trend ($F[1, 199] = 6.94$, $p < .01$). That is, foreign language anxiety appeared to increase linearly as a function of year of study, with freshmen ($M = 2.83$ $SD = 0.58$) and sophomores ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 0.67$) reporting the lowest levels of foreign language anxiety, followed by juniors ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 0.72$), and seniors ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 0.68$). Finally, a post-hoc Scheffé analysis of the means revealed that seniors reported significantly higher levels of foreign language anxiety ($p < .05$)

than did sophomore students. In addition, a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed no difference ($F[2, 207] = 2.74$, $p > .05$) in levels of foreign language anxiety between students enrolled in beginning- ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.70$), intermediate- ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 0.70$), and advanced-level classes ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 0.59$).

Discussion

The results of this study strongly suggest that certain students are at risk of having debilitative levels of foreign language anxiety. Therefore, it is important that foreign language instructors not only recognize the possibility that some students experience high levels of anxiety, but also are able to identify these at-risk students. Instructors can begin to explore instructional strategies that reduce these anxieties and enable students to exploit fully the resources available to them. Based on the findings of this study and subsequent logical analyses, several suggestions are made.

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